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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000013

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARP

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SUBJECT: (C) THE PARADOX OF KUWAIT'S ISLAMISTS

Classified By: CDA FRANK URBANCIC; REASON: 1.4 (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Kuwaiti Islamists face a unique political quandary in the Islamic world. Their ideological suspicion of the US resembles what our colleagues in other Muslim societies encounter daily, but it runs counter to their experience of the US role in liberating Kuwait, which most still genuinely appreciate. END SUMMARY.

(U) The Kuwaiti Difference

12. (SBU) There is a great difference between Kuwait and all other Arab states: Kuwait is the only one that owes its independent existence to the US. To put it another way, Kuwaitis have experienced two things more than any other Arab people outside Iraq itself: the brutal reality of Saddam's regime and the saving reality of the US intervention to liberate their country. Most Kuwaitis have not lost sight of either of those historical realities.

13. (SBU) More than other segments of Kuwaiti society, Islamists decry US military "interference" in the region. When reminded that the same argument, if heeded, would have precluded the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, they concede that sometimes US military and political involvement in Arab affairs is justified. They even acknowledge our support for the Bosnian Muslims. But they are routinely unwilling to give the US the benefit of the doubt. When speaking of any other situation, they spout the same line that our colleagues throughout the region encounter every day: the US is out to oppress Muslims, take Arab oil, and generally do the bidding of Israel.

The Irrefutable Realities

14. (SBU) Kuwaitis know that the US liberated their country from aggression by a neighboring Arab Muslim state, that we never seized Kuwaiti oil, and that we have not imposed our values or policies: to this day, Kuwaiti women lack basic political rights; even when some other GCC states took steps towards normalization with Israel, Kuwait did not. Whereas other Arabs may be able simply to deny these realities, Kuwaitis cannot. Even most Islamists acknowledge these irrefutable facts, they just refuse to learn from them.

Despite Our Great Friendship, We Just Don't Trust You

15. C) We have met recently with several prominent Kuwaiti Salafis (very conservative Sunnis, essentially "Wahhabis," though they would never describe themselves that way, any more than Saudi "Wahhabis" would) -- all of them current or former Members of Parliament (MPs). All insisted that we are over-stating the number of Shia and under-stating the number of Sunnis in Iraq, Iran and Kuwait. They charged that the US is disenfranchising the Sunni Arabs of Iraq.

16. (C) One MP, a leading member of the Salafi Movement (aka "Scientific Salafis"), claimed that the Afghans were better off under the Taliban, because now "they have drugs and no security there." He alleged that the US targeted innocent civilians in Afghanistan and "opened the doors to hell in the region." Even so, he insisted that he only opposes US policies, not America itself. "Maybe some believe the US is pure evil," he remarked, but "we do not agree with this." Another Scientific Salafi MP criticized the US both for intervening (e.g. in Iraq) and at the same time for failing to intervene (e.g. in support of the Sunni minority in Iran). He said the US must focus on dialogue with the people of the Middle East, not just their leaders, who often are not representative.

17. (C) COMMENT: We wish we could report a modicum of soul-searching on the part of Kuwaiti Islamists, but we have not encountered any and do not expect to. There are enough things for them not to like about the current situation in the region to keep them from having to face the contradiction between their ideological bias and their personal experience: the rise of the Shia, continuing insecurity, and wild rumors of Israeli activity in Iraq; increased opium-poppy cultivation in Afghanistan; growing talk of educational reform at home; the Guantanamo Bay detainees controversy, concerns about possible requests for Iraqi debt relief and waiving Gulf War compensation claims, and of course the

perennial favorites: US "blind bias" for Israel against the Palestinians, and the simple reality that we, who are neither Arab nor Muslim, have a large military presence in the region and wield enormous influence.

18. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: The inherent contradiction of the Islamist position regarding the US undermines their credibility with other Kuwaitis, but we do not think it is the primary bone of contention between them; beliefs about Islam's proper role in society count much more than whether the Americans are getting a fair shake.
URBANCIC